Aegean Monkeys and The Importance of Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in Archaeoprimatology: A Reply to Urbani and Youlatos (2020).

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Abstract

In replying to our 2019 publication: "A New Identification of the Monkeys Depicted in a Bronze Age Wall Painting from Akrotiri, Thera," Urbani and Youlatos (2020) argue for the traditional identification of the monkeys depicted on the north and west walls of room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera, as vervet monkeys (Fig. 1). Their argument is based largely on previous scholarship and their analysis of monkey morphology as it appears in the Bronze Age artwork. Here, after clarifying some misconceptions and misquotations, we thoroughly contextualize the wall painting in question, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between disparate disciplines for a multifaceted and rigorous approach. The nature of the item in question is key in this reply: we are studying artwork. Because this is a cultural representation of monkeys rather than a study of live primates or preserved specimens, consideration of artistic choice, color conventions, and the agency of the artist are important for answering the questions raised by Urbani and Youlatos, stimulating further cross-disciplinary discussions.

Keywords: Langur; Bronze Age Aegean; Art; Exchange; Indus

Introduction

We are grateful for Urbani and Youlatos' (2020a) reply to our article regarding the possible identities of the monkeys depicted in room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera (Fig. 1) and their *Antiquity* publication (2020b), as they contributed a general summary of previous scholarship that we did not have space to include. We published our results in a primatological journal to encourage conversation among specialists who are qualified to examine morphological traits of the depicted primates, not previously done

for Aegean Prehistorians. Because previous claims regarding the possible identities of the monkeys were made in archaeological and art historical publications, little opportunity for fruitful discussion among primatologists was possible. Here, we clarify the misconceptions and misrepresentations in Urbani and Youlatos' reply, then consider the nuances of reading Aegean wall paintings, focusing on the blue color of the monkey.

Misconceptions and Misrepresentations

Urbani and Youlatos state that we rely only on tail carriage to propose the langur identity (2020a, p. 2). They describe the tail carriage of both langurs and vervet monkeys, concluding "none bears any inverted U-shaped tails and/or tail tips touching or reaching their bodies, a unique tail posture in langurs," (2020a, p. 2-3). They argue that the facial markings, features, and "orange and reddish-orange" eyes better suit the vervet species (2020a, p. 3). They also suggest that we identified all Aegean monkey iconography as langurs. This misrepresents our article in several ways.

First, we propose the langur identity *only* for the monkeys from Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. We stated that we do not assign new species identifications to other fragmentary Aegean wall paintings of monkeys. We acknowledged the possible baboons identified in several previous publications. We are not comfortable proposing new identifications for extremely small items that lack adequate features for accurate attributions, or highly fragmentary wall paintings lacking integral details of the primate's morphology. Nevertheless, glyptic art specialists have previously identified monkey images on small media as Hanuman langurs (Barnett, 1973; Van Buren, 1939).

Second, we considered multiple morphological traits when examining the wall painting. Media coverage in several publications oversimplified the argument by focusing on the animals' tails (Wu 2019; Powell 2020; Marshall 2019; Whipple 2019). We considered only the traits visible from the original fragments of the painting and not the reconstructed portions. Of eight possible individuals depicted, the tails of five are reasonably well preserved (Fig. 1a, b). The extreme U-shaped position of the tail that Urbani and Youlatos argue should be represented if these are indeed langurs may be preserved in the fragments to the far right of the north wall; they may simply be reconstructed in the wrong position in relation to the (almost

completely reconstructed) body of the monkey (Fig. 2). Similarly, monkeys with no tail fragments preserved may also have exhibited such a posture, as no two monkeys seem identically posed.

Third, dark eyes and "conspicuous and visible ears," occur in both taxa and do not aid this discussion (2020a, 3). Perhaps the strongest distinguishing facial feature is the white band of hair crossing the vervet's forehead; langur's facial hair is more uniformly white. Original fragments of only three monkeys' faces are adequately preserved to illustrate these conclusions. Finally, we clearly state that we considered the animals' physical proportions and gestures in addition to facial markings and tail carriage.

In another misrepresentation, a quotation was changed. Our published statement reads: "Aegean wall paintings typically lack this level of detail," (2019, 1) and Urbani and Youlatos quote, "Aegean wall paintings typically lack … [ideal] level of detail" (2020a, p. 3). By adding "ideal," Urbani and Youlatos change the meaning of our sentence and suggest that we reference the *subjective quality* of the wall painting. Removing this quote from context allows additional manipulation: our statement asserts that this painting *preserves* many significant details illustrating the langur identity, and *breaks* with traditional understanding of Aegean iconography.

Pareja's quote from *New Scientist* is also taken out of context and used to suggest inconsistency (2020a, p. 4). Currently, *direct* contact between the Indus and Aegean cannot be proven. No published evidence indicates that Aegean people were travelling to the Indus (or vice-versa), but it is possible that *indirect* exchange was taking place via the groups inhabiting the areas between them. Importantly, trade indicates a formal and longstanding system that was regularly used and likely regulated. In contrast, exchange indicates a more casual movement of goods, with or without a reliable infrastructure or route, and may take place over several years or generations. Mesopotamia presents the clearest evidence for such exchange (Pareja in press), particularly in light of studies like Pittman's.

Urbani and Youlatos question our citation of Pittman's work and discussion of Presentation Scenes. They state that the Minoan carnelian seal showing a monkey and male figure resembles other Minoan art (from the Aegina Treasure) rather than drawing upon eastern artistic traditions (2020a, p. 5). They argue that artifacts from the Indus were misidentified as primates, and that this caused erroneous "hyperdiffusionist suggestions concerning the alleged iconographic dispersion of monkey imagery from the Indus River Valley to the far west," (2020a, p. 7). They review and perpetuate several pitfalls of the traditional

approach to monkey imagery in the Aegean (2020a, b). To be clear: we state that the presence of Egyptian connections with regard to most monkey imagery does not necessitate a *purely* Egyptian origin for the monkeys in question. A deeper understanding of the relationships between these regions throughout the Bronze Age is required to fully understand the ramifications of this statement.

Critically, Pittman's work supports an Aegean-Indus connection by highlighting the appearance of humanoid and hybrid creatures in seated postures from compartmented metal stamp seals (1984). Harper, Aruz, and Tallon corroborate this pattern, stating that the motif of monkeys seated on stools like humans is found as far west as Susa, which they then support with additional evidence for Susa's well-documented exchange with the Indus Valley (1992, p. 97). Pittman also discusses the cross-and-chevron motif in Bactria/Marginalia (1984. p. 56); it appears first in the Indus, then in Bactria/Marginalia, then Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, and Anatolia, before the Aegean. The motif serves as some of the evidence for Pareja's newest project: incorporating Egypt into the westward movement of Indus materials, products, and iconography.

Additionally, Presentation Scenes (as seen on the Levantine seal from Mochlos) are part of a visual tradition that comes from the east, as Collon highlights (1995, 2005; Pareja 2017, 2019). The Aegean appropriation of the scene's composition is integral to understanding Aegean monkey iconography. The Offering to the Seated Goddess wall painting from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera, is an eloquent illustration of the importance of different cultural elements' confluence: an eastern composition, a deity bedecked in gemstones and textiles that likely come from the Indus (Arnott in press 2020), an African monkey, and an Aegean style and location (Pareja 2017, 2019). To deny the importance and longstanding tradition behind the scene's composition is neither simple nor elegant, nor does it constitute rigorous scholarship.

Our article does not address the Early Bronze Age (EBA) Anatolian Trade Network (ATN; Şahoğlu 2005) due to a limitation on length. The EBA objects we discuss clearly fit into the ATN, particularly in light of the other high-value, exotic objects recovered and identified with a sort of early "Golden Age" in the Aegean (Colburn 2008; Arnott in press, p. 13-14). Mesopotamia serves as such an integral part of this exchange network that some argue it served as a middle-man between Egypt and Crete (Şahoğlu 2005). The Aegina Treasure, which Urbani and Youlatos reference to argue against an Indus connection (citing figures as monkeys that are either ape or human, as neither possesses a tail; 2020, p. 5), houses some of the earliest and

clearest evidence of Aegean-Indus exchange. Urbani and Youlatos fail to mention carnelian beads that were shaped in the Indus, cut in Mesopotamia, then deposited on one of the westernmost Aegean islands by the middle of the Early Bronze Age (Chakrabarti 1993; Reinholdt 2003). The Aegina Treasure shows not only exchange, but also the *path* of exchange for these beads. Furthermore, a single collection of such valuable objects from a variety of locations suggests a much larger Afro-Eurasian network (Colburn 2008). The earlier examples of monkey and ape imagery fit well into the EBA ATN model, constituting an important addition to the growing corpus of eastern finds from Crete reflecting its participation in this EBA network (Klengel 1984; Lambrou-Phillipson 1990; Şahoğlu 2005; Shank 2005; Aruz 2008; Colburn 2008). This new discovery, explored in Pareja (in press), constitutes another way in which our work contributes to and expands on many much larger, trans-regional studies in prehistoric Africa, Asia, and Europe.

To dismiss the Late Bronze Age connections is to deny the existence of well-documented exchange between The Aegean, Egypt, the Near East, Mesopotamia, Bactria, the Indus, and the smaller regions between, known from more than a thousand years before the creation of the painting in question (Sarianidi and Kowalski 1971; Pittman 1984; Harper, Aruz, and Tallon 1992; Aruz 2003, 240–243; Reinholdt 2003, 260–261; Moorey 1994; Ratnagar 2004; Şahoğlu 2005; Colburn 2008; Kenoyer 1997, 2008; Kenoyer et al. 2013; Groman-Yaroslavski and Mayer 2015; Pareja and Chapin 2020; Arnott in press). Some of these routes even predate the Bronze Age (Wilkinson 2014). Evidence for such far-reaching exchange continues to accumulate (Valamoti 2013; Jones et al 2015; Miller et al. 2016; Linares et al. 2019; Pareja and Chapin 2020). Pareja (in press) details the evidence from texts, raw materials, and iconography that supports the movement of monkey imagery between the Indus and Aegean from the Early Bronze Age through the eruption at Akrotiri (beginning of the Late Bronze Age). These connections were thoroughly exploited by the time this wall painting was created.

Finally, while we deeply appreciate critical engagement, we respectfully take issue with two points in Urbani and Youlatos' reply: first, the abovementioned misquoting and misleading use of quotes without context, and second, the incorrect and biased use of such words as "alleged" and "myopic" which suggest that our work is without evidential basis and singular in focus (Urbani and Youlatos 2020a, pp. 1, 8). These features do not contribute to rigorous and respectful scholarly discussion and debate, and we do not perpetuate their use.

Color, Symbolism, and Agency

Our project's strengths come from the integration of seemingly dissonant disciplines. By pairing primatologists, with knowledge of live animals (platyrrhines and catarrhines), with a taxonomic illustrator and an art historian/archaeologist who can interpret ancient artwork, we have created a team that is well equipped to explore the nuances of prehistoric depictions of primates. In contrast, Urbani and Youlatos' reply highlights the problematic nature of collaboration between individuals who work in similar fields (platyrrhines) relying on traditional scholarship in other disciplines. Critically, we are studying art, and failure to acknowledge the choices made by the artists is to deny them agency – their ability to craft the image and choose its details. Some of these details rely on nuanced concepts such as color theory, symbolism, and familiarity with the rapidly-emerging study of indirect exchange between the Indus and the Aegean.

When considering the monkeys in Bronze Age Aegean wall paintings, blue pelage is immediately apparent. Urbani and Youlatos repeat traditional arguments about this phenomenon (2020a; 2020b). The first states that the monkeys are blue because vervets have bright bluish/greenish skin that the artists emulated. The blue skin of vervets is highly localized, occurring only on males' lower abdomen and scrotum. The rest of the skin is dark, and therefore should not be represented as blue. Furthermore, this argument works *only* for attributing the vervet identity, but *all* monkeys in Aegean wall paintings are painted blue – even those Urbani and Youlatos identified as baboons, which also possess dark skin. Why then would artists choose to paint baboons an "incorrect" color? Urbani and Youlatos repeat a traditional theory: blue "represented the green/gray scale as actual blue," (2020a, p. 4; 2020b; Platon 1947; Doumas 1992; Morgan 2005), a convention that artists may have adapted from Egypt (Greenlaw 2011). They also claim that: "Aegean artists most likely culturally lacked the color 'blue'," (p. 4) a theory so popular among art historians (Gillis 2004, p. 58) that it appears in podcasts (Radiolab 2012). Although this idea is on the right track, it is reductionist, lacking both nuance and contextualization within Aegean art.

The solution to the mystery of the blue pelage is both simple and elegant: blue is used symbolically in these depictions, not realistically. Pareja (in prep) is developing our understanding of Aegean Bronze Age color theory: a concept that is much explored for Egypt but remains critically lacking for the Aegean (this theory was presented at the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America). Blue pigment

illustrates many visual elements in Aegean painted plasters, including fish, dolphins, rock work, silver metal, plants, feathers, blue- or purple-dyed garments, the people's shaved scalps (male and female, child through adult), and monkeys. Aegean wall paintings are considered luxurious architectural dressings, reserved for elite or important spaces, and therefore the imagery in wall paintings constitutes part of elite expression; it features a visual vocabulary of identity, luxury, and access to rarity (animals, materials, objects, people, perhaps even gods). This constitutes the first step toward better understanding the iconography of monkeys as exotic, foreign, rare, and associated with elite lineage, networks, and identity.

The materiality of blue pigment is important: the pigment used to render the monkeys' color is Egyptian Blue (frit), a synthetic compound created by the Ancient Egyptians, the name of which translates as *fake lapis lazuli* (Cavassa, Delamare, and Repoux, 2010; Frison and Brun 2016; Becker in press). This material is used to simulate the rare, valuable, luxurious material that comes from one place: Afghanistan (Fig. 3). This raw material was one of (if not *the)* most valuable raw materials, and its appearance outside of Badakhshan, Afghanistan is cited as evidence of the earliest indirect exchange between populations in Europe and Asia; it appears in both the Indus and Bronze Age Aegean (Sarianidi and Kowalski 1971; Ratnagar 2004; Wilkinson 2014; Pareja and Chapin 2020; Arnott in press; Chapin and Pareja in press).

The monkeys' blue pelage *enhances* their already-understood nature as foreign, exotic, eastern, important, rare, and luxurious. The roles of animals in Mesopotamian *and Egyptian* culture as mystical intermediaries – perhaps even partially or wholly divine – is clear. The same role is depicted in the Offering to the Seated Goddess fresco, where a blue monkey makes an offering to a seated goddess on behalf of a young woman. If all Aegean blue monkey imagery – whether showing baboons, vervets or langurs – is considered together in this way, then the realistic color of part of one species of the animal is irrelevant to the color chosen for most of their bodies in Aegean art, while it *is* relevant to their special roles, associations, and symbolism (Pareja and Chapin 2020).

Artistic considerations account for some of the morphological trouble faced by Urbani and Youlatos: we are studying artwork, not live monkeys. Artists typically choose frequently observed behaviors and postures from *their* experience, rather than the scientifically documented range of possible poses and behaviors, and some details *may* escape their notice or even be ignored. For example, the monkeys' eyes are rendered with a brilliant yellow ochre, as opposed to a realistic but less striking red ochre. A second example:

202 individuals are sometimes shown with two left hands or two right hands in Aegean art, or even an awkward
203 and seemingly anatomically impossible appendage (Immerwahr 2005). Perhaps Aegean artists depicted what
204 they considered to be the most notable differences in the most prominent features, such as the tail and face,
205 rather than the color of the hands. The hands and feet of some of the monkeys from Room 6 of Building Beta
206 support this idea (Fig. 4), as these boot-like appendages are certainly not realistic. Similarly, the more
207 extreme range of tail movement may be of less importance to the artist than the most frequently observed tail
208 carriage: the S- or C-shapes.
209 Finally, Urbani and Youlatos miss important aspects of art history and archaeology: cultures both
210 adopt *and adapt* imagery, technologies, and other ideas from one another. We did not claim that the monkeys
211 in *any* Aegean art were identical to or rendered in the same style as any of the (few) Indus depictions of
212 monkeys. Aegean art appropriated the *image* of the live langur for their own wall painting, in their own
213 artistic style. Although some Aegean primate iconography directly quotes long-standing traditions in eastern
214 art, these pieces are not identical in appearance or interpretation.
215 Aegean depictions of monkeys belong to a larger, established Aegean canon of artwork that
216 emphasizes certain features and elements more than others. A deeper understanding of Aegean prehistory,
217 art, and archaeology enables a more thorough examination of – in this case monkey – iconography. This
218 image, from the Late Bronze Age, stands on more than 1,000 years of preexisting art, culture, and long-
219 distance exchange. The relationships between various regions and the Aegean did not *begin* during this
220 period but were already well established. To not only draw such parallels but more deeply explore them
221 requires familiarity with these other, far-flung regions' artistic styles, symbolism, and general culture. Real
222 progress in such a multifaceted and complex field is more likely if we build interdisciplinary team of
223 specialists with a broader array of disciplines; in our case, we benefit from experts on catarrhine morphology
224 and behaviors, depiction with taxonomic precision, and historical and material culture.
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Ethical Approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Figure Captions

Figure 1a: Monkeys Fresco on the west wall of Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. Image granted from the photo archive of Thera Akrotiri Excavations.

Figure 1b: Monkeys Fresco on the north wall of Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. Image granted from the photo archive of Thera Akrotiri Excavations.

Figure 2: Detail of original fragments of monkey on far right from the Monkeys Fresco on the north wall of Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. After Doumas 1992, 121, fig. 86.

Figure 3: Map of the Aegean, Egypt, Near East, Mesopotamia, and the Indus. Adapted from Google Earth.

Figure 4: Detail of Original Fragments of Monkey Feet from the Monkeys Fresco on the north wall of Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. Image granted from the photo archive of Thera Akrotiri Excavations.

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